

## REFERENCE AND EXISTENCE

*by Lyle Angene*

It is unwise to begin a paper with an apology, so I begin with a confession. I am interested in what might have been but will not be. Might certain things which do or will exist have been a certain way even though they never will be so? Might certain things though they never will exist have existed nevertheless? Are there any interesting differences between these last two questions?

Derivative from these possibly bizarre interests are other concerns. Can we talk significantly about things which never will exist? Can we think about such things? Can we imagine them? If we can talk and think about things which might have existed but never will, how can we do so without quickly lapsing into nonsense?

One source of my embarrassment in revealing these interests is that they are exceedingly vague. By this I do not simply mean that on some moderately rigorous standard of philosophical clarity the questions of the preceding paragraphs are open to charges of unclarity and imprecision. One does not need a standard to detect paradigm cases of vagueness. A second source of embarrassment is that I cannot say just why I am interested in these questions. Supposing there were a rough way of isolating genuine philosophical issues from spurious ones, it is by no means clear that the pursuit of my interests will lead to genuine philosophical issues of some importance. But the greatest source of embarrassment is the worry that I am setting out to clarify and answer questions that ought to be "dissolved" instead. As was pointed out to me by Stephen Sutton, a graduate student at Rice, although you might not be able to have a fox chase without a fox, a wild goose chase does not require a wild goose.

My point in bothering you with this confession is to explain what I am trying to do in this paper and why I am attempting to do it. I presently see no direct way of dealing with the issues mentioned in my first paragraph. But I do think some progress can be made on what I have called derivative

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issues. And in dealing with these derivative issues I have found nothing more provocative and hence helpful than some of Professor Gilbert Ryle's early logical works.

# I

Can one imagine things which might have existed but never will? One's first reaction here is, "of course." There is Puff the magic dragon, Pegasus the winged horse, and the notorious Mr. Pickwick. Not only do there seem to be certain *individual* things which we can imagine even though they will never exist, there seem to be many *sorts* of things of which there never will be any instances, e.g., centaurs, unicorns, griffins, time-travel machines, and pumpkins which turn into coaches. Yet, here is at least one case where the citing of examples is not conclusive, for it is not clear just what these examples are examples of since it is not clear how we are to construe these so-called make-believe, mythological, and fictional entities.

Possibly a more fruitful approach would be to follow up some of Professor Ryle's remarks about imagination. Ryle notes that "we may imagine something to be the case with a 'real' object, as when I imagine, for the purposes of an historical romance, Socrates as being a bachelor or a coward. . . ." Ryle gives to this "type" of imagining the tag "non-fabulous imagining." The possibility of non-fabulous imagining seems to entail the possibility of imagining things which do (or did) exist to have properties or characteristics which they never had nor ever will have. Thus, I can imagine Socrates as a coward or perhaps myself as the editor of *Mind*. Care needs to be taken in how one describes what is imagined in these instances. I am not imagining Socrates as an imaginary coward nor myself as an imaginary editor of *Mind*. Rather what I am imagining to be the case is that Socrates be cowardly in just the way that real cowards are and that I be the editor of *Mind* in just the way that Professor Ryle was. Thus, noticing that there is such a thing as non-fabulous imagining and noticing what this involves leads us to admit that it is indeed possible to imagine that certain particular things which do exist have certain specific properties or characteristics which in fact they never had nor ever will have.

But if we grant that the sort of non-fabulous imagining described above is possible, notice what seems to result. Surely if we can imagine that Socrates be a coward, we can also imagine that each of the 501 Athenians who sat on his jury be blessed with greater philosophic insight than they in fact possessed. And if this is imaginable, it is also imaginable that the verdict at Socrates' trial might have been different. We can imagine Socrates being sentenced to chisel a statue of Apollo to be placed in the Agora. And given Socrates' respect for the law, it is easy to imagine that he carry out this sentence. But notice what we have just imagined. If we imagine Socrates carrying

out his imagined sentence we imagine coming into existence a statue (the *Socrates Apollo*) which never existed. We have imagined a statue which never did exist. We have been led by our non-fabulous imagining to a case of fabulous imagining.<sup>2</sup>

Lest the above example seem to exploit the ambiguities connected with the notion of artistic creativity, it should be noted that similar cases without this feature are possible. It is imaginable that Joan of Arc not have been executed at an early age. And if it is imaginable that Socrates be a coward, it also seems imaginable that Joan of Arc cease to be a virgin, conceive, and bear a daughter. But Joan's daughter, whom we have imagined coming into existence, did not exist and never will. And thus by a series of non-fabulous imaginings we have imagined a person who never will exist.

At this point the early Ryle, whom I am using to keep me honest, has a ready objection.

All imagining is imagining *that* something is the case. The correct form of reply to the question What are you imagining? would be to state a complete proposition, prefaced by a 'that'. It would be incorrect to reply by naming or describing a thing. . . . And if I can show, as I have to do anyhow, that the cases which one would feel tempted to describe as imagining a person or imagining a thing are really cases of imagining that something is the case, I think I shall have done all that is required of me.<sup>3</sup>

Before looking at the reasons behind Ryle's objection, let us see how he applies his view to cases of the sort sketched above. In the course of trying to explain what is involved in constructive fabulous imagining,<sup>4</sup> Ryle asks, "What then is Dickens doing when he is doing what we would find natural to describe as 'creating' one of his characters, say, Mr. Pickwick?"<sup>5</sup> Ryle's answer is that "What Dickens did was to compound a highly complex predicate and pretend that someone had the characters so signified."<sup>6</sup>

Applying the suggested treatment to our *Socrates Apollo*, we get something like the following: When I said that we were imagining a statue which never will exist, what we were really doing is constructing a complex of characters (being a statue, being placed in the Agora, being fashioned by Socrates, etc.), and imagining or pretending that something had these characters. But is this so? To be sure we were imagining that the *Socrates Apollo* had these characteristics. Yet it is clear from other remarks Ryle makes that this is not what he meant. When Ryle talks about imagining or pretending that *something* has certain characters, it is clear that he means some existent thing. But were we imagining that some existent thing had the characters of being a statue, being placed in the Agora, being fashioned by Socrates in fulfillment of his sentence, etc.? At least it is clear that we did not have some particular existing thing in mind which we were imagining to have these characteristics. That

is, we were not thinking of some actual statue created by Praxiteles that it had been fashioned by Socrates. Of course one can think that something or other from among all the things that exist has certain characteristics without having any particular thing in mind. But is this what we were doing?

Were we supposing that some one or other among all the statues that ever will exist had the characteristics we imagined the *Socrates Apollo* to have? I do not think so. For notice that if this were what we were doing, our imagining would be a case of non-fabulous imagining. We would be imagining something which exists (though we know not which thing) to be characterized in a certain way. And this does not seem a fair statement of what we were doing. We were engaged in fabulous imagining. We had imagined coming into existence something which never did nor never will exist. By this point we were no longer imagining that among the things which exist certain ones (we know not which) were characterized in certain ways. Rather, we were imagining that a certain statue (we know which) which never will exist was characterized in certain ways. We were, if you like, imagining that the class of all statues include a member which it never will.

## II

We are now in a position to see what is strange about Ryle's treatment of Mr. Pickwick. Ryle tells us that what Dickens did in creating Mr. Pickwick was "to compound a highly complex predicate and pretend that someone had the characters so signified."<sup>7</sup> Ryle attempts to bring out the plausibility of this position by asking us to suppose that by sheer chance there was a person of whom the complex predicate created by Dickens was in fact true. Ryle then says:

Then we could say that Dickens' propositions were true of somebody. (Dickens would not, of course, have been an historian, for he invented his propositions and did not found them on evidence.) But it seems obvious that we could not say of the real Mr. Pickwick, 'Oh, he is not identical with the hero of the story.' For his own life is *ex hypothesi* faithfully recorded there. We could now understand the whole story as before and know as well that there was such a man. And we should not dream of saying that there were two heroes of the story, one real and one imaginary, and the real one was exactly similar to, though numerically different from, the imaginary one. On the contrary, we should say that while previously we had thought Pickwick Papers was only a *pretence* biography, we now find that, by coincidence, it is a real one.<sup>8</sup>

The suggestion that one could unknowingly (by sheer coincidence) write a biography is bothersome, and not just because it would take such a remarkable series of coincidences. Just as one could not unknowingly be someone's biographer, it seems that one could not unknowingly write someone's biography. Yet I do not want to make too much of this point.

The chief worry that I have with Ryle's remarks quoted just above is that

even in the imagined circumstances it seems incorrect to say that the real (recently discovered) Mr. Pickwick is the hero of Dickens' story, i.e., it seems incorrect to say that Dickens' story is about the real Mr. Pickwick. Of course we can and do talk about people or things without knowing whom or what we are talking about. I can cast aspersions on the individual who dropped a banana peel on the sidewalk without in any sense knowing who did so. But Dickens' remarks are not of this sort. Dickens does have a definite individual in mind, and so the question of whom if anyone he is talking about is not to be decided by discovering whom if anyone his remarks are true of (that is, by discovering who if anyone has the characteristics Dickens ascribes to Mr. Pickwick).

### III

Objections arise. What is meant when I speak of having some definite individual in mind when the "individual" in question is one who never will exist? How can one even talk about individuals which never will exist? Is not one involved in some sort of contradiction when one speaks of the characteristics of nonexistent objects? I shall briefly discuss each of these three objections.

How is it possible to have some *definite* individual in mind when the "individual" in question is one who never will exist? I believe that this is a question that bothered Ryle when he wrote "Imaginary Objects." Ryle observes in a parenthetical remark, "I fancy that only then is a proposition 'about' something when it makes sense to ask of it not merely '*what* is it about?' but '*which* of the so-and-so's is it about?'"<sup>9</sup> Do questions of the latter sort make sense when one is speaking of nonexistent individuals? In the case of the *Socrates Apollo*, could one not only say what *sort* of statue he had in mind, but *which* statue as well? Here it is important to note that certain techniques are not available. Sometimes we can indicate which statue we are talking about by pointing to a particular statue, but one cannot point to nonexistent statues.

But although pointing is often a clear way of identifying which individual we are talking about, it is probably not the most frequently used method. In linguistic communication any one of the various referring devices can be employed. In suitable circumstances we could use either a name or a description to refer to the individual in question. At this point we have already moved to the second objection raised above, for how can we describe or name what never will exist? Before turning directly to this objection there are a few points connected with the first objection that need to be made.

There are genuine worries about the sense in which the *Socrates Apollo* is a definite individual. Exactly how tall is it? Precisely how much does it weigh? What sort of stone is it made of, and from what part of the ancient world did this stone come? We can either say that there are no answers to these questions or else ask for a little time to make up answers. Obviously

neither of these responses is appropriate in the case of some particular existing statue. Also, however difficult it might be in practice, it makes sense to set about counting the number of actual statues sculpted by a given sculptor. But counting the statues which Socrates has been or could be imagined to have sculpted is at best an enterprise which can be given a sense. Before one could even begin this latter task one would have to make some stipulations about what counts for sameness and difference in the case of imaginary statues. Considerations of this sort would obviously play a major role in any argument designed to discredit speaking of particular imaginary individuals. But does the fact that there are these important differences between imaginary and real individuals imply that talk of having some definite individual in mind who never will exist is completely wrongheaded?

Here we need to recall what led us to speak this way in the first place. Sometimes we talk about an individual who falls under a certain description (e.g., 'the present editor of *Mind*') without knowing who that individual is. Thus I might say, "The present editor of *Mind* (whoever he is) didn't think much of the paper I sent him." And sometimes we talk about an individual when we know perfectly well whom we are talking about. Thus, I might say, "The previous editor of *Mind* didn't much care for it either." One might characterize a significant difference between these two cases by saying that in the former I had no one in particular in mind while in the latter case I did, namely, Professor Ryle.

A quite similar contrast can be made in the case of talk about imaginary individuals. I might say, "The main character in Dickens' last novel (whoever he or she is) was probably as finely drawn as Mr. Pickwick." Here we have one remark about two individuals, the main character of Dickens' last novel and Mr. Pickwick. Although there is a sense in which I am talking about the main character in Dickens' last novel, since I do not know who this is, I do not have someone in mind, and I do not know which character I am speaking about. In contrast, my remark was also about Mr. Pickwick, and here I did have someone in mind and I do know which character I am speaking about.

Most of you have probably noticed that the contrast drawn in the preceding paragraph involves what Ryle calls reproductive imagining. Is there a parallel in the case of constructive imagining? The difficulty here is in getting a case of talking about someone, we know not whom, when the someone in question is an individual we have created by our own constructive imagining. In certain respects this just is a significant difference between constructive and reproductive imagining which should not be obliterated. But even here there is a distinction which resembles the contrasts drawn above. Recall the case of Joan of Arc's daughter. In our imaginary tale, we left Joan just as she had borne a daughter. We had not yet "given" the daughter many specific characteristics at all. (But of course it would be mistaken to say that what we had imagined was an individual *without* many specific characteristics. What



would it be to imagine someone who was just someone's daughter and had no other features at all?) In this respect Joan's daughter differs somewhat from the *Socrates Apollo*. We "fleshed out" this statue to some extent and thus are in a position to compare it with, and distinguish it from, other statues both real and imaginary. Provided this "fleshing out" were done in sufficient detail, it would be appropriate to mark the distinction between the cases of imagining Joan of Arc's daughter and the *Socrates Apollo* by saying that in the latter case we had a more or less definite individual in mind while in the former we did not.

By stressing similarities among talk about real individuals, individuals imagined first by others, and individuals which are products of our own imagining, I have tried to show that in each of these contexts there is a place for the notions of having a definite individual in mind, knowing whom or what you are talking about, and being able to say which of the so-and-so's (persons, characters, or statues) one is talking about. But even if these points are granted, there are other worries. Even granting that in cases both of constructive and of reproductive imagining the imaginer can have a definite individual in mind, we can still wonder how it is possible for the imaginer to talk about that individual. More specifically, how is it possible to refer to that individual, i.e., to identify him for our audience?

#### IV

There are at least two sources of puzzlement here. One is a certain view or picture of what makes reference possible, and the other is a view as to what it means to say of something that it exists. When one combines these views one gets the following results:

I believe that a lot of people are tempted to hold the erroneous belief that imaginary objects are objects with a special status because they suppose that an act of imagining has an object in the special sense of being correlated with a namable or describable thing, in the same sort of way as acts of seeing, fearing, hitting, making and begetting are correlated with namable or describable things. . . . I have, of course, already given the crucial reason why imagining cannot be correlative to an imaginary object—namely, that it is a tautology to say that imaginary objects do not exist. So there *could be no such correlates*.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout this paper I have taken pains to avoid assigning imaginary objects a special status, and I have especially tried to avoid saying that imaginary objects exist. But I have not tried to avoid saying that some acts of imagining are "correlated with a namable or describable thing" since I think this is indeed the case. Are there any good reasons for thinking that the *Socrates Apollo* is not describable? Consider the following observation:

A descriptive phrase is not a proper name, and the way in which the subject of attributes which it denotes is denoted by it is not in that subject's being *called* 'the so and so,' but in its possessing and being *ipso facto* the sole possessor of the idiosyncratic attribute which is what the descriptive phrase signifies.<sup>11</sup>

Now if this is correct *and* if there are reasons for thinking that the *Socrates Apollo* could not possess such an "idiosyncratic attribute," then we might have grounds for saying that the *Socrates Apollo* could not be described in the requisite sense. I believe both of these suppositions are false.

If we gloss 'subject of attributes denoted by a phrase' as 'subject of attributes to which a phrase is used to refer,' it is clearly false that we can only refer to something with a descriptive phrase if that phrase signifies an idiosyncratic attribute of the thing in question. In suitable circumstances I can refer to Rice's philosophy department with the phrase 'the department' even though the said department is not alone in possessing the attribute signified by my phrase. I can even refer to something with a phrase which signifies an attribute that the object of reference does not possess. Consider the following imaginary case:

Suppose (as is the case) that Professor Ryle has retired from his position as the editor of *Mind*. Suppose further (as is not the case) that no one has been named to succeed him in his position. Under these imagined conditions it would of course be quite possible for someone mistakenly to think that Professor Ryle still held his old position. Upon hearing that Professor Ryle was to visit the Rice University campus, such a person might well relate the good news to his acquaintances by exclaiming, "The (present) editor of *Mind* is coming to Rice."

Not only does it seem correct to say in this case that Professor Ryle was referred to, but it also seems that the reference could be successful, that is, the speaker could use the phrase to get his audience to know whom he was talking about. Such successful reference could occur if the speaker's audience shared his particular misconceptions, or if they were aware of his misconceptions without sharing them, or if they already knew of Professor Ryle's visit.

Here it will be objected that the switch from 'subject of attributes denoted by a phrase' to 'subject of attributes to which a phrase is used to refer' is in some way illegitimate. There are important differences here, but when the issue at stake is what we can or cannot talk about, the relevant concern is surely that of what we can or cannot use a phrase to refer to.

## V

But even if it is not necessary to use a description which signifies an idiosyncratic attribute of the *Socrates Apollo* in order to refer to it with a description, there is still a worry about saying that the *Socrates Apollo* possesses any attributes at all. For if something were to possess an attribute, it might seem that for that very reason it would exist.

Of course, there is a sense in which any character [attribute] whatsoever involves existence. . . . What has a quality or stands in a relation or is of a kind *ipso facto* exists.<sup>12</sup>

Rather, though this is again misleading, a thing's being real or being an entity or being an object just consists in the fact that it has attributes.<sup>13</sup>



To say of a named or described something that it is not real or is not an object or entity must be nonsensical. For its having that name or description is already a case of possessing an attribute, whereas the denial that it was real or was an entity was the denial that 'it' possessed any attributes.<sup>14</sup>

This last quotation connects Ryle's views on what it is to exist with his objection to saying that imaginary individuals are nameable or describable. To possess a name or to be correctly describable as a so-and-so is to possess at least one attribute, and to possess an attribute is to exist. Thus things which do not exist are neither nameable nor describable.

Yet surely something is wrong here. How could possessing the attribute of having a name "make" something real? Perhaps we need to distinguish among attributes. Possibly having a name, being describable, and being imagined<sup>15</sup> are not the sort of attributes which are such that to possess them is to exist. But what attributes are of this kind? Even attributes like "is green" and "was Prime Minister" seem to be such that an imaginary individual could possess them without existing. In fact, within certain limitations (which would be quite difficult to spell out in a non-question-begging way) it seems that you can choose any attribute you please, and if we cannot think of an imaginary individual which possesses that attribute, then through constructive imagining we should be able to create one.

Here it will be objected that though we cannot isolate from all attributes those whose possession amounts to existence, there is a natural sense of 'to possess an attribute' in which to possess any attribute at all is to exist. But what is this sense of 'to possess an attribute'? A candidate which would work can be found in Lewis' definition of the notion of the denotation of a term: "The *denotation* of a term is the class of all actual or existent things to which that term correctly applies."<sup>16</sup> If there were some natural sense of 'to possess an attribute' in which to possess an attribute was to belong to the denotation of some term, to possess an attribute would be to exist. For to belong to a class of existent things is surely to exist. However, I deny that Lewis' definition of denotation can be used in this way to provide us with something that could legitimately be called a distinguishable sense of 'possessing an attribute.' My reasons for this denial were mentioned earlier, but need restating.

Suppose I imagine the *Socrates Apollo* as being made of marble. To put what I have imagined in attribute jargon, I have imagined that the *Socrates Apollo* possesses the attribute "being composed of marble." But what sense should we attach to the phrase 'possesses the attribute' as it occurs in the above sentence? If we are to come up with a correct description of what I have imagined, we must say, "exactly the same sense as the phrase has in the following remark: The *Apollo* from the west pediment of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia possesses the attribute of being composed of marble." To be sure the two claims, "the *Socrates Apollo* is composed of marble" and "the *Olympia Apollo* is composed of marble," have different "implications" and

would *perhaps* be verified in interestingly different ways. But these differences cannot be traced to differences of the attributes predicated or differences in the way the two statues are said to possess their respective attributes. However much one admires the metaphysical housecleaning inspired by the notion that to possess an attribute is to exist, accepting this notion seems to involve us in the multiplication of senses beyond intelligibility.

In this paper I have tried to defend the claim that one can imagine, think about, talk about, and refer to things which never will exist. And I have tried to present my defense without committing myself to the position that these things must in some sense be or exist. To the extent that I have achieved this latter objective I am in accord with one of the primary aims of Professor Ryle in his early works. But even though my former objective does not itself involve metaphysical inflation, it may lower some of the barriers against the inflationists which others would wish to keep up. Of course I am still a long way from my ultimate objective of saying something about what might have existed but will not. But before pursuing this objective, I should give Professor Ryle a chance to point out what is wrong with my attempts to date.

#### NOTES

1. Gilbert Ryle, "Imaginary Objects," reprinted in *Collected Papers* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1971), II, p. 73.

2. Ryle characterizes as fabulous imagining, imagining something "with an imaginary object."

3. Ryle, "Imaginary Objects," *Collected Papers*, II, p. 72.

4. Ryle distinguishes originaive, constructive, or creative imagining from derivative, reconstructive, or loaned imagining. He also calls the latter reproductive imagining. "Dickens was imagining constructively when he first made up the story of Mr. Pickwick; we are imagining reconstructively when we read it." *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

11. Ryle, "Systematically Misleading Expressions," reprinted in *Collected Papers*, II, p. 49.

12. Ryle, "Mr. Collingwood and the Ontological Argument," reprinted in *Collected Papers*, II, p. 109.

13. Ryle, "Imaginary Objects," *Collected Papers*, II, p. 64.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

15. Ryle explicitly denies that imaginariness is a property or that "is imagined" signifies an attribute. But the criterion used to distinguish predicates which do signify attributes

from those which do not is not clear to me. However, nothing in my argument turns on this point.

16. C. I. Lewis, "The Modes of Meaning," reprinted in *Semantics and the Philosophy of Language*, ed. Leonard Linsky (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1952), p. 52.